

A growing concern

A Central Otago couple combine their culinary and scientific talents in a saffron-growing venture that's attracting interest around the world.

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THERE'S A MYSTIQUE around saffron, one of the world's most expensive spices. It conjures images of souks and markets in distant lands, where vibrant piles of the precious culinary commodity lure cooks with their scarlet hue and heady aroma. But not all saffron comes from far-off locations; Wynyard Estate Saffron is just 10 minutes from Roxburgh in Central Otago in the Teviot Valley. The area is best-known for stone fruit and grapes, but saffron thrives in Central's hot, dry summers, and the high UV light of the south is thought to intensify its colour and flavour.

Saffron is the stigma and styles – known as “threads” in the business – of the flower *Crocus sativus*. It's thought to have originated in Iran or Greece, and is used to

flavour, colour and scent dishes including risotto, bouillabaisse and biryani.

But its uses extend beyond the kitchen. In fact, the bulk of the Wynyard Estate Saffron crop is not destined for jam, cordial and chutneys, or the paella pans of Auckland. Much of it is used in the manufacture, at a Good Manufacturing Practice (GMP)-certified New Zealand facility, of the company's Hawk Eye saffron capsules. Saffron's potent antioxidants have been shown to support eye health and may help prevent age-related macular degeneration.

Wendy King and Graham Strong established Wynyard Estate Saffron in 2012, after researching medicinal crops while looking for a new commercial venture. King is a chef by trade and Strong has a PhD in

botany. “We'd always had an interest in growing plants, and in health, and when we were researching different crops we came across some interesting facts on saffron that made us think we should experiment,” says King. “We bought 20 corms [saffron bulbs] online and had a go at growing them in tubs in our back yard in Dunedin.”

The experiment went so well that, knowing people were successfully growing saffron in Central Otago, they moved to Dumbarton in 2012. They purchased a lovely home with a 1.4ha garden and this outdoor haven has become part of the Wynyard Estate Saffron experience. King takes visitors on tours of the garden and the area where the saffron is grown, and finishes with the edibles section of their property,



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where produce of all types flourishes, including apples, nectarines and raspberries. The tour concludes in the saffron studio, where she has created a range of saffron-infused produce. “I just love trying out new ways to use what we grow. I'm constantly experimenting,” she says.

But it was the research on macular degeneration that most excited the couple. “There have been seven clinical trials showing impressive results, so we knew growing it for supplements made good commercial sense,” says King. And that is how it has played out: people buy the Hawk Eye supplements on repeat, and report that it has benefitted their declining eye health. “You can't make medical claims about natural products,” she says, “but the proof for us is what our customers say, and how they keep coming back.”

At its peak, 70 percent of Wynyard Saffron's sales were to the US, though Covid has changed these figures of late. “In the US some people get recommended saffron pills by optometrists and ophthalmologists, and they go online to find them,” says King.

“We clearly remember when we broke into that market. An article appeared in a medical journal that linked saffron

with slowing macular degeneration, and it referenced New Zealand saffron in particular. The phone started ringing, the email was pinging, and it was all go from there.” It's become a multi-faceted business. On one side it's all delightful garden tours and preserves; on the other, it's supplements gaining serious global attention.

Harvesting is all done by hand and there's a lot of weeding the rest of the year. Picking is April/May, with 85 percent of flowering production occurring in a three-week window. Flowers are picked and processed by hand, by around a dozen local women. It must happen when the flowers are closed, or just opening, to ensure the stigma quality and minimum exposure to dirt and dust. Next, there's de-threading, then the removal of the stigma, before it is dried for six weeks.

It's clear the couple is passionate about

what they do and they constantly look for ways to increase production and efficiency. “This year we are experimenting with covers,” says Strong. “There has been a significant difference between covered and uncovered soil temperatures for the first stage of this experiment. It's very exciting as we wait to see how this affects stage two and stage three.”

From an initial harvest of just 30g in 2012, to now turning out kilos of Wynyard Estate Saffron and selling to customers all over the world, the future looks bright – bright red. wynyardestatesaffron.com

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